

Interview with
Mrs. Nellie Arevalo
Pomona, California
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Several years ago I used to be receptionist for Dr. Alejandro Wallace in Brawley. He is an old man who has practiced in Imperial County for many, many years; I think he may have retired by now. He is Spanish speaking himself, so a lot of the nationals always used to come into him for treatment; when there used to be a lot of wetbacks in the Valley, he did a considerable amount of charity work. The braceros were usually covered by insurance, so he would charge them the same as he would charge local people, or ~~the~~ rather, he would charge the insurance company; he would wait until a pretty good size of bills had piled up, and then send them in to Los Angeles to the insurance company.

It is hard to say what special types of illnesses these men used to ~~in~~ come in with, it was pretty much like anybody else, some of one thing, some of another; there were a good many respiratory diseases of course. I don't recall any mental cases coming in to Dr. Wallace while I was working for him, I do remember that there were quite a few accidents in 1951 or '52. I remember a time when 19 men were brought into the office all at once, they had been injured when the truck that was hauling them to the fields had tipped over, it was quite a ~~gi~~ big case and the State sent down some investigators. I think the State took some action on transportation of the workers after this. Another thing that we used to have a great deal of was food poisoning, we didn't have too much of it among the men who were fed in camps or who were fed by an individual grower, but we used to have a good deal of it among the men who were boarding themselves. I remember one fellow who was carried into

our office who had gone to work in the morning with a stomachache; he told his friend that he thought it would go away once he had started working, well, he collapsed in the field and he was dead by the time he got into the office. The post mortem showed that he had died from food poisoning.

Doctor Wallace did all the medical work for the nationals who were employed by two or three large growers around Brawley, and then he also did a considerable amount of work with men who just came in on their own because they wanted to go to a Spanish speaking doctor. I used to talk with the men before they went in to see the doctor, they were always very happy to talk because apparently they hadn't been able to find too many in this country who were friendly and who were able to speak their language; it used to make me kind of sad sometimes, they seemed so hungry for someone to talk with.

In those days we used to have a lot of wetbacks in the Imperial Valley, I remember some of them very clearly. There was one woman in Brawley who was very well known, she was a wetback and she had 13 wetback children. She had no husband, he had deserted her, or else maybe, she had never been married, I don't know; some people used to say that all 13 of her children had different fathers, anyway, she supported her children by working out in the fields tying carrots and so forth, just like a man. Whenever she wanted to go down to Mexicali for shopping or for a little rest, she had no money for a bus ticket so, she would just turn herself in to the Border Patrol which had a station there in Brawley. They put up with this for years then, finally, one day they decided they had had enough, they threatened to crack down on her, they said, "You've had enough free rides, lady, when we take you down to Mexicali this time, you are going to stay there." Well, what she did was, she brought all 13 of her kids into Border Patrol headquarters and she cried a little bit, you know; so finally they threw up their hands and they said, "O.K.,

lady, you can stay here but behave yourself."

Another case that I remember very well was a little boy nine or ten years old who came all the way up to the Imperial Valley from his home which was somewhere in central Mexico, it's a long trip and I don't know how he made it; maybe hitchhiking, maybe riding on freight trains, anyway he showed up one day outside of our place, and we got to talking to him. He said that he was sent up here by his parents to support the family, his parents weren't well apparently, or weren't able to make enough to support the family; he had several brothers and sisters but they were all younger than he was. Well, we kind of took him under our wing, my husband and I, we gave him meals at our house and gave him clothes, and things like that. He worked around Brawley picking cotton he was only able to make only \$2 or \$3 a day because he was such a little fellow, but he sent all of it home, every penny of it, and I guess that he was able to support his family this way; finally he disappeared. Maybe he was picked up by the Border Patrol, maybe he went back home on his own.

Speaking of wetbacks, my husband, Joe, was a wetback for five years. When he first came up he tried working in the fields, but he was only able to stand this for a month or so; then he got a job in a dry cleaning plant in Brawley, he worked there for five years. The funny thing about it was that all the Border Patrolmen used to have their cleaning done at this particular place, they knew Joe was working there, and they knew he was a wetback, but they just laughed about it I guess maybe it helped that I knew several of the Border Patrol people myself and they knew I was married to Joe, so they didn't want to make things tough for us.

Later on Joe got a visa, this was about 1951, and for awhile he worked as a trucker and field boss for crews where were working in the

cotton. Some of his ~~wet~~ workers were wetbacks some of them were braceros he always told me that he preferred to work with wetbacks because they never griped if the cotton was ~~too~~ thin or if the pay was low, or anything like that; they used to like Joe too, in fact, one time Joe wanted to quit before the end of the season so the grower was going to have to bring in ~~another~~ another foreman, all the workers said they were going to quit too, they were going to refuse to work unless Joe was their foreman so he stayed on until the end of the season.

There is quite a bit of difference between the wetbacks and the braceros when it comes to spending money. The wetbacks were free~~er~~ spenders than the braceros are, they used to ~~for~~ come into town in the evenings or on weekends and spend their money right then and there, the braceros come into town too, but they just come to look around. I used to work in the J.C. Penny store in Brawley, and I ~~was~~ also used to work in Rascoe's, which is another department store. The braceros used to come in droves every payday to cash their checks, and then they would ask me to help~~x~~ them make out Mexican bank drafts so they could send their money home to Mexico. They used to come in to see me this way because I was able to speak Spanish, and because I was willing to talk to them as friends; but they never bought very much, the only time that you would find a bracero spending very much money was ~~at~~ just before he was about to be sent home, then they would get these foot lockers and fill them up with clothes and toys for the children and things like that. I remember one fellow who came in with three pay checks that he had been saving up and he spent them all in one crack for clothes for his family.

The result of the Bracero Program I think you could say is that the businessmen in Brawley have had a tough time since 1954, when they pretty much eliminated all the wetbacks and brought in braceros instead. I know

for a fact that Woolworth and Sears, Roebuck, and National Dollar Stores, just to mention three, have closed down their stores in Brawley. I imagine the same sort of thing has taken place in El Centro and other towns throughout the Valley.

There used to be considerable bad feeling between the nationals and the local fellows. The local boys looked down upon the nationals as though they were real small, this applies both to wetbacks and braceros; for the most part they kept out of each others' way, so there wasn't too much real trouble, but over on the east side of Brawley there is a pretty tough district where they have poolhalls and cantinas, over there they used to have fights between the locals and nationals every so often, these fights were over women mostly, I think. I remember one time when one Bracero killed another bracero with a knife, they were quarreling over a Mexican-American girl who was working as a barmaid in the place.

I used to feel real sorry for the braceros, they had come up here with such high hopes, and I talked to so many who were going back to Mexico discouraged and bitter. I ~~waxed~~ cashed one check for a fellow for \$6, which was for a full week's work, he hadn't been ~~at~~ laid off, he had worked all week and that was what he had to show for it. Many of the men used to complain to me that money was being deducted from their checks for things besides board and insurance, they never quite understood what these other things were, but it made them very disturbed. I know of many cases where braceros were simply taking off and going back to Mexico after a week. I know of many other cases where fellows who were having a rough time of it would skip their contracts and head north because they had heard ~~that~~ they would get a better deal up there.

If you ask me the braceros deserve better treatment than they get. They work awfully hard you know, terribly hard, much harder than a local person would be willing to work in that heat.